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The effects of extracurricular activities on student achievement and success

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The effects of extracurricular activities on student achievement and success

Abstract

"Participation in extracurricular activities at the expense of academic learning time has become an issue in education. Decisions limiting or curtailing these activities are made on the assumption that they interfere with the primary purpose of education. If sound decisions are to be made regarding balance between formal instruction and extracurricular activities, we must determine whether they enhance or hinder learning. In other words, are they an integral part of a meaningful educational curriculum for adolescents, or a superficial distraction from it?" (Haensly, Lupkowski & Edlind, 1986) In 1984, Hall, Rutherford, Hord and Huling reported that the co/extracurriculum, which represents a rich array of opportunities and experiences, may be one of the reasons many students stay in school, much less find personal meaning for this time in their lives.

The Effects of Extracurricular Activities on
Student Achievement and Success

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by

Timothy J. Means

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"Participation in extracurricular activities at the expense of academic learning time has become an issue in education. Decisions limiting or curtailing these activities are made on the assumption that they interfere with the primary purpose of education. If sound decisions are to be made regarding balance between formal instruction and extracurricular activities, we must determine whether they enhance or hinder learning. In other words, are they an integral part of a meaningful educational curriculum for adolescents, or a superficial distraction from it?" (Haensly, Lupkowski & Edlind, 1986)

In 1984, Hall, Rutherford, Hord and Huling reported that the co/extracurriculum, which represents a rich array of opportunities and experiences, may be one of the reasons many students stay in school, much less find personal meaning for this time in their lives.

Today, in schools across the nation, budgets are tightening, enrollments are declining, and those charged with providing educational programs are being forced to look at measures in an attempt to extract as much as possible from every educational dollar. Programs are being cut, activities curtailed in an effort to provide the most cost-effective educational program possible. Critics of the extracurriculum feel that it is just that, "extra", and do not look at it as an asset in need

of being protected. This is why studies aimed at determining the effects of the extracurriculum on student achievement and success are more important now than ever before.

Examination of the effects of extracurricular activities is especially timely and important in an era of limited financial resources for schools. Declining enrollment and inflation have tightened school budgets over the last two decades and have produced a heightened perception of the need for accountability in school programs. The last decade has brought a new emphasis on academic achievement. As a result, educators and the public have looked critically at the activity programs offered in secondary schools. Some programs have been eliminated in order to provide resources perceived of as being better used elsewhere. Mostly, such critical review and decision making has been made on financial grounds and has been uninformed by empirically based knowledge of the effects of programs on adolescent development (Holland & Andre, 1987).

While critics such as Mendez (1984) claim that the place of extracurricular activities as part of the secondary school program has been taken too far, Stanford (1985) claims that the reformers are attacking the very basis of the student activity program-it's rationale for it's existence. Camp (1990) suggests that

questions regarding the efficacy and legitimacy of extracurricular activities in the schools is not new. In fact, Gholson (1985) reports that extracurricular activities for public school students were not generally accepted by educational leaders prior to 1900. He continues by saying that if some of the current reformers are successful, the role of extracurricular activities in the education of future public school children could be seriously curtailed.

Holland and Andre (1987) discuss the question in regards to two separate "value positions" in regards to the "worth" of the extracurricular program in secondary schools. They explain that generally, people involved with this question have either an academic or developmental perspective. The academic perspective focuses on intellectual competence and stresses that the purpose of schools is the pursuit of academic excellence and the transformation of formal knowledge. From this perspective, extracurricular activities provide a means for relaxation or fun, but are clearly unimportant to the primary purpose of schools. In contrast, the developmental position stresses that school programs should provide experiences that further the total development of the individual students. The developmental position is more equalitarian, stressing that the development of all individuals must be

considered in planning a school program. Nonacademic programs can be as important as academic programs in facilitating the development of the individual.

So what are the effects of extracurricular participation on student success and achievement? In a "Special Report" in the May, 1989 issue of Phi Delta Kappan, Anne C. Lewis summarizes the results of the extensive study done by Holland and Andre.

Their findings suggest that:

- 1) Participation in extracurricular activities enhances self-esteem. (The State of California is so interested in this aspect of human growth that it has a legislative initiative regarding ways to foster self-esteem in schools elsewhere)

- 2) Some extracurricular activities, such as competitive sports, are more successful than other efforts in promoting better race relations among students.

- 3) Extracurricular activities promote positive behavior and establish lifelong habits of civic participation.

- 4) Those who participate in a variety of extracurricular activities tend to have higher grade-point averages and score higher on college entrance examinations.

5) Extracurricular participation is related to higher career aspirations and attainments.

6) Participation rates are higher in small schools than in large schools.

The developmental qualities of extracurricular activities are also seen as important elements in regards to self-concept and self-esteem. Boyer (1984) states that "high schools, to be effective, must have a sense of purpose...must go beyond keeping students in schools and out of trouble, and be more significant than adding up the Carnegie units the student has completed." Haensly, Lupkowski and Edlind (1986) suggest that adolescents will socialize with their peers, whether as part of a well-planned school extracurriculum or in an autonomous peer society and through this socialization, will enhance self-concept or disrupt it, learn what to choose and what not to choose, attain successes and achievement or failures, and most important for the adolescent, experience affiliation or social isolation. The extracurriculum, either in athletics, band, drama and other nonacademic expressions of talent, serves as an important substrate for and influence on the accomplishment of this critical adolescent development.

Yarworth and Gauthier (1978) support the worth of extracurricular activities as they report that their study did establish the importance of self-concept in the relationship between academic achievement and participation not only in athletics but in non-athletic activities the school activity program as a whole. In a 1971 report, Spady suggests that extracurricular activities provide opportunities not only for diversion, social interaction, and peer-group recognition, but for serious pre-occupational role-playing as well as leadership and skill development. To the extent that success in school activities is related to the development of a number of capabilities and abilities, as well as to one's sense of competence and importance, vis-a'-vis his peers, the extracurriculum, (like the academic curriculum), becomes a vehicle from which status perceptions and future aspirations evolve and upon which future success is grounded. Spady's comments seem to echo the research of Holland and Andre listed earlier concerning the developmental benefits derived from participation in the extracurriculum.

Several of the researchers which I investigated linked participation to positive attitudes and characteristics which may be useful later in life. The

activities appear to be a nurturing, facilitative force for developing life-long career talents. And, most important they are an important context for the social and emotional development that adolescents must accomplish to become productive and satisfied members of the adult society. Students apparently realize that this type of socialization can and does occur in the extracurricular activities of the secondary schools. (Haensly, Lupkowski & Edlind, 1986).

Cuccia (1981) reports that extracurricular activities, being an integral part of the educational system, seem to be accomplishing their intended function. The extracurriculum is providing students with a viable mechanism in which to develop participatory skills. Although participation in extracurricular activities is somewhat limited due to various organizational policies, many students are deriving benefits that lead to positive adult behavior. Otto (1975) agrees, saying that participation in extracurricular activities provides socialization for attitudes and skills that have later-life payoffs.

When discussing the pros and cons of extracurricular activities, probably the single-most often asked question involves how they affect academic achievement. Hanks and Ecklund (1976) found that not only does

participation in various activities serve as a socially integrative function, but it also encourages higher levels of academic performance. Likewise, Yarmouth and Gauthier (1978) state a significant relationship has been found between involvement in school activities and concurrent academic achievement as measured by class rank and grades. Additionally, it appears that involvement in extracurricular activities is not primarily associated with average or poor academic performance (Haensly, Lupkowski & Edlind, 1986). In fact, Jacobs and Chase (1989) found that when groups were compared on grade-point average, the mean GPA for active students (3.05) was significantly higher than the GPA for inactive students (2.54). The active students were significantly more positive toward all aspects of the program. It is noteworthy that students who participate in activities also have a more positive attitude toward school in general.

Yarworth and Gauthier (1978) continue by saying that students who were the most active in the activity programs tended to receive the highest grades in academic study. This is important, as this point asserts that not only is participation in activities important in regards to academic achievement, but that the students who are most involved are also the ones who are the most successful academically.

Lewis (1989), quoting a report prepared by the Office for Educational Research and Improvement, found that students who ranked high in the number of courses taken, hours of homework, test scores, and grade-point average, were also more involved in extracurricular activities. Students who were very active (four or more activities) earned 24% more credits in English, math, science, and social studies than did those who did not participate in any activities; were more likely to have spent at least three hours per week on homework; scored better on a test of vocabulary, reading, and math; and were only one third as likely to have grade-point averages of 2.0 or less.

The findings of Holland and Andre (1987) included a report by Feltz and Weiss (1984) which also dealt with the relationship between achievement and the number of activities a student is involved in. Their report states that ACT scores were higher in girls who were engaged in five or more activities than in girls engaged in four or fewer activities. Otto (1975) concurs saying that quantitative measures of activity involvement independently correlated with educational attainment. The single greatest correlation with participation for both males and females was with grades (Holland & Andre, 1987).

Many researchers believe that there is also a positive correlation between activity participation and positive career aspirations, attainment and success. Spady (1971) reported that participation in activities, especially athletics, is strongly associated with having high status perceptions. This feeling of being important and recognized in the peer-group in turn stimulates a desire for further status and recognition after high school. Since the most visible and widely accepted form of success-striving is college, educational aspirations become for many a proxy for high status and personal recognition. The extracurriculum serves as a means toward this end both by providing opportunities for success that lie outside the formal academic structure and by helping students to develop attitudes and skills that will bolster these aspirations.

In a study involving 17 year-old male students, Otto (1975) found that participation in high school activities was significantly related to later educational achievements. Haensly, Lupkowski and Edlind (1986) report that cutting back or discontinuing extracurricular activities could have far-reaching ramifications. As reported by Bell (1967) there was found a significant difference between high school dropouts and non-dropouts in the number of leadership roles taken on. The lack of participation in school

activities was a significant characteristic of the dropout. School personnel should make an effort to involve students in the activity program because a meaningful experience in a chosen activity may make the difference between a dropout and a high school graduate. Otto (1975) found that participants are more likely to go on to college.

Part of the study done by Haensly, Lupkowski and Edlind (1986) involved asking two open ended questions to groups of students involved in the extracurricular programs of their schools. The questions asked of the participants were: "what benefits did you receive from participation in extracurricular activities" and "how did extracurricular activities help or hinder you?" The responses were grouped according to whether the student was a high achiever or low achiever. The response to question one was, in order of frequency: (1) meeting other people, (2) increasing responsibility, (3) Making school more enjoyable, (4) developing leadership abilities, (5) broadening interests, (6) developing self confidence, (7) preparing for a career, (8) enhancing time management, (9) maintaining physical condition or health. In response to the same question, the low achievers answered this way: (1) meeting other people, (2) having a learning experience, (3) preparing for a career, (4) making school more enjoyable, (5)

increasing responsibility, (6) greater involvement in school, (7) becoming more outgoing, (8) developing leadership abilities, (9) increasing self-discipline.

While some of the responses differ somewhat, there were many similarities between what the high and low achievers were experiencing through participation in extracurricular activity programs.

In regards to the question of how the activities hindered the students, the responses indicated that very few students regarded participation that way. In fact, the majority of students stated that it had not hindered them in any way. In the high achieving group, five stated that the activities hindered their studies, and one complained that it was difficult to make up work that was missed because of participation. Again, it should be stressed that the responses to this question were very infrequent; most of the students who participated found many benefits from extracurricular activities (Haensly, Lupkowski & Edlind, 1986).

As critics call for reductions in programs in the face of declining enrollments and budget crunches, Holland and Andre (1987) make quite a different claim stating in regards to their research that it seems clear that the available research on participation in

extracurricular activities has identified provocative relationships between participation and personality/social characteristics. They believe that the existing results support an argument that extracurricular activities potentially can play an important role in the school's contribution to each child's development. The existing results fully justify allocation of resources and research effort to developing a more complete understanding of the role of extracurricular activities in adolescent development.

After considerable review of current literature, I have concluded that extracurricular participation is a very valuable tool which should be available to and encouraged for all students involved in the secondary school program. The research does in fact pose questions regarding how we presently do business. For instance, if participation does in fact foster academic achievement, the development of self-esteem etc., then it would only seem logical to discontinue the enforcement of eligibility rules which are tied to certain academic performance standards. This type of rule exists in virtually every secondary school. But, if we "buy-in" to what the research suggests in regards to the links to achievement and development associated with activity participation, these eligibility rules, based on academic requirements, seem contradictory. Otto (1975) reported "a sobering policy implication of

my findings should be noted: high school policies which deny participation in extracurricular activities to those who have not achieved a minimal grade-point average may be penalizing those very students who may need it the most." Echoing Otto's statements, Camp (1990) summarizes his research by saying that if the findings and conclusions from this study are accurate, one must conclude that there is at least a symbiotic, and at most an important positive, causal relationship between participation and achievement. Given that conclusion, the rationale for exclusionary rules is highly questionable.

Given my own personal experiences in nine years as a teacher and coach, I have had the opportunity numerous times to discuss this topic with both students and parents. It seems that, without fail, as soon as their son or daughter begins to perform below what they feel is acceptable in their school work, they quit athletics or drop band, etc. I have responded to them by telling them to do what they feel is best, but that I will bet that after a period of time, their grades will not improve, and may even go down. I explain to them that unless they plan go home from school everyday and study during the time which they would have been in practice or at a game, then they can not blame the activity program for their poor grades.

More often than not, they quit anyway, and again more often than not their grades do go down. I believe that this is due to their new found "freedom" and the idea that they now have all kinds of time to do their homework and end up wasting more time than before, rather than using the time wisely. Extracurricular activities force students to organize, budget their time wisely and prepare.

As a teacher and a coach, I have always believed strongly in the benefits of participation. I agree with the idea expressed by Holland and Andre that more research is needed in this area to understand how best to utilize the activity program in order to enrich and better serve our students. I truly believe that the first step is to refer to these activities as cocurricular, rather than extracurricular, in an effort to equate their worth and potential with the academic curriculum and to recognize the cocurriculum as an integral component of a successful secondary school program.

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